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"Nobody Can Take Our Story": Competing Representational Narratives of Immigrants without Legal Status

Abstract

This paper explores the power of representation within the context of undocumented immigrants' uncertain future in the United States. Guided by forty oral history interviews with undocumented immigrant narrators conducted in New York City, I trace the origins and evolution of *reclaimant narratives*, that is, the experiential, partial, public, oppositional, and incondensable stories that the narrators use to assert their right to speak and to reframe audience understanding. This project elucidates how the narrators interpret and respond to the thematic commonalities in mainstream portrayals of undocumented immigrants in United States discourse, and how, given the power of representation, these portrayals come to have an outsized effect on the national conversation about immigration. I synthesize existing scholarly analyses of mediated portrayals of immigrants, and put the interviewees into conversation with foundational scholars of media's persuasive potential and limitations. The narrators testify to how their encounters with secondhand mediated portrayals of immigrants influence their decisions about whether to cultivate a public voice and participate in firsthand narrative immigrant activism. Ultimately, this work offers a critical exploration of the ways undocumented immigrants harness the power of storytelling as a means of self-actualization to mitigate the fear and uncertainty of life without legal status and to advocate for immigration reform.

Keywords

Immigrant Activism, Representation, Media, Oral History, Storytelling.

1. Introduction

Katherine Chua Almirañez remembers learning that she was *tago nang tago*. "I didn't understand what that meant as a kid," she recalls. "The label was there and I would hear the words, but...I didn't really understand." Katherine was born in Manila, Philippines, in 1979. She arrived in the United States when she was eight years old with her

grandparents, who told her she was *tago nang tago*—a Tagalog phrase used to describe undocumented Filipinos that translates to English as “always running or hiding.” When Katherine was in high school, her grandmother explained to her the implications of being an undocumented immigrant. In the United States, Katherine would not be able to vote or hold public office, would not be legally authorized to work, and would live under constant threat of detention and deportation. “That was the first time where I started to dream small,” Katherine remembers.

She started paying close attention to the ways undocumented people were represented in public discourse, and became quickly frustrated. “I don’t like the way immigrants are portrayed because it’s always in extremes. I’m either seeing the celebration of immigrants or the degradation of immigrants,” Katherine explained to me with some exasperation. “Either they’re [about how] undocumented immigrants are stealing our jobs and raping our people, or they’re sad, sad stories, and the families are being broken apart...I just find it frustrating that in order to get attention it has to be worst story or the greatest story.” For Katherine, these extremes overshadow the idea that immigrants are real people with lives that do not easily fit into a prescribed mold.

After grappling with her frustration, Katherine began to cultivate a desire to reframe the public narrative about immigration by speaking openly about how being undocumented affected her life.

I just remember thinking, all I want is just to be able to go to work, have friends, feed my dog, and be of service in some capacity. I’m not asking for applause every time I walk out of my apartment. I’m not expecting anybody to revere my story any time I walk into a room. I just wanted to be acknowledged as a human being... I want to be able to dream big and I want to be able to not have to lie.

She began with painting. “I just kept painting until I found the strength or the permission to use words,” she remembers. For Katherine, storytelling is inseparable from the undocumented experience, because, she explained, “The thing that nobody can take from us is our story.” In 2011, she wrote and directed a stage play called *Undocumented* that ran from August to October and toured around New York City. “Where do you go when you get tired of hiding, but [are] too scared to run? What do you do when you’re not sure if you’re a victim or a criminal?” the play’s description asks (Almirañez, 2011). In 2013, Katherine was featured in a short film called *Out of the Shadows*, where she tells her story candidly. Today, she describes herself as a multidiscipline storyteller, and spends time working with other undocumented young people who are learning to tell their own stories.

Katherine’s frustration over the polarized, extreme narratives that dominate the immigration debate and her decision to counter these portrayals by publicly telling her own story clarifies the contested role of storytelling within the national conversation about undocumented immigration in the United States. In this paper, I address the role of storytelling within the lived experiences of undocumented immigrants by tracing the origins and evolution of a particular kind of activist storytelling that I call *reclaimant narratives*. Reclaimant narratives are the experiential, partial, public, oppositional, and incompressible stories that marginalized individuals use to assert their right to speak and reframe audience understanding (Bishop, 2018).

As is clear from the narrators’ perspectives guiding the project, this kind of storytelling is an act of *reclaiming* the power to speak for oneself. Although these autobiographical stories belong to those who have lived them, they have been usurped by others, with motives of their own, who hold the social and legal power and privilege to speak for or about undocumented immigrants to public audiences. Feminist poet Gloria Anzaldúa (2009) describes such a practice when she asserts, “I speak, to rewrite the stories others have

miswritten about me.... To achieve self-autonomy" (p. 30). Undocumented immigrants who have appeared merely as characters in others' stories use reclaimant narratives to reposition themselves as storytellers and reframe public narratives according to autobiographical lived experience. These narratives do not exist merely to entertain or even to explain, but to reinterpret and redefine who immigrants are, demonstrate the effects of a lack of documentation, and advocate for immigration reform.

To situate the motivation and potential of reclaimant narratives, this paper explores the power of representation within the context of undocumented immigrants' uncertain future in the United States. Although a good deal of scholarship exists that chronicles the ways immigrants are portrayed in media, more work is necessary that gathers and explores immigrants' reactions to these portrayals so that the scope of media's tangible and intangible effects is observed rather than hypothesized. To address this need, and in a symbolic effort to foreground rather than diminish the voices of immigrants without legal status, this project first draws on oral history interviews with undocumented immigrants in order to elucidate how these narrators describe, interpret, and respond to thematic commonalities in secondhand mediated portrayals of immigrants. Then, I put the undocumented narrators into conversation with foundational scholars of media's persuasive potential and limitations, and synthesize these scholars' analysis of mediated portrayals of immigrants. I provide both theoretical and pragmatic contextualization as the narrators recount how their encounters with these secondhand portrayals influenced their decisions about whether to cultivate a public voice and participate in narrative immigrant activism. Ultimately, this work offers a critical exploration of the ways undocumented immigrants harness the power of storytelling as a means of self-actualization, to mitigate the fear and uncertainty of life without legal status, and to advocate for immigration reform.

2. Method

From May 2015 to November 2016, I conducted forty oral history interviews with immigrants who have, for varying amounts of time, lived as undocumented immigrants in New York City. Immigrants may be undocumented because they entered the United States without legal permission, often via the Mexican border, or because they arrived legally in the United States with visas that later expired. Oral history involves conducting in-depth, semi-structured, autobiographical interviews with open-ended questions that are designed to avoid anticipating particular findings. The interviews are long-form, conversational, and nongeneralizable since they tell the embodied histories of individuals in highly particular contexts.

The decision to employ oral history for this project had both pragmatic and symbolic implications. Pragmatically, oral history allowed me to "radically contextualiz[e]" the narrators' experiences rather than to consider them in isolation (Grossberg, 2010, p. 116). I draw on a model suggested by Stuart Hall for analyzing events in terms of their impact on individuals. Hall (1999) describes how any message, experience, event, or encounter is "decoded" accordingly to individuals' "structures of understanding," or personal tendencies to react in highly specific ways based on previous knowledge, level of involvement in the experience, values, beliefs, or desires (p. 509). Oral history works to draw these structures of understanding into view by providing opportunities for narrators to talk at length about their lives and experiences rather than limiting the focus to a certain prescribed hypothesis.

Symbolically, collecting and archiving oral history accounts promotes the validity of multiple histories rather than only a few authorized accounts from a dominant group. It contests the monopolization of history by individuals in privileged social positions and preserves for future individuals, students, and scholars accounts that may otherwise be inaccessible or prone to neglect.

The participants were born in eighteen unique nations of origin across five continents. The narrators range in age from 19 to 42; all of them arrived in the U.S. before the age of 27. As is often the case in research involving undocumented populations, I used multiple means for recruiting. My priorities during recruitment were diversity of ethnic background and of current immigration status. Because I was especially interested in the ways individuals without legal status develop a public and political voice, I first began to identify participants through a review of New York-based digital immigrant rights activism. Reaching out to immigrant artists and activists via email, Facebook, or LinkedIn, I provided a brief description of the project and an invitation for a meeting and interview. Because of my focus on political advocacy, undocumented activists who have told their immigration stories publicly are purposefully overrepresented in this study.

In order to understand what is at stake in the decision about whether or not to cultivate a public voice, and to incorporate the stories of individuals who have not gone public about their status, I supplemented the aforementioned recruiting technique with announcements about the project throughout the City University of New York, which currently enrolls around 6,000 undocumented students (Waltzer, 2017). Recruitment became easier as I began investing myself more in the undocumented community in New York through attendance at pro-immigrant rallies, performances, and events, volunteering with local immigrant rights associations, and teaching more immigration-related courses. At this point, snowball sampling helped to round out the number of interviewees and to increase the diversity of perspectives I encountered. Participants were given the choice to use their real names or pseudonyms. In cases where narrators chose to use a pseudonym, identifying details that would compromise their anonymity have been omitted.

The average length of each interview was approximately one hour. To avoid the risk of perpetuating the pervasive underpayment of immigrant labor, after five pilot interviews, each of the remaining narrators received a \$60.00 gift card in exchange for their time. Following the Oral History Association's recommendations, I prepared an interview guide of some questions that I asked each narrator. Other questions were developed mid-interview, guided by the narrators' responses. I recorded the audio from each interview and had the recordings professionally transcribed. I worked with my research assistants to index the transcripts by arranging their content thematically in order to identify issues of concern to more than one narrator. In keeping with the Oral History Association's view that interviewee and interviewer are co-creators of a narrative, and because the barriers to education and work that undocumented immigrants face has led to their gross underrepresentation in academic research, I have attempted wherever possible in this work to include the narrators' perspectives in their own words instead of paraphrasing. In the interview quotes that appear in the following pages, I have removed filler words ("um," "uh," and "like") and false starts for clarity.

3. The Power of Representation

Historically, undocumented immigrants have been limited in their ability to represent themselves in both news media and political rhetoric (Burroughs, 2015). Instead of speaking with undocumented immigrants, news and political media often rely on individuals and groups who are not undocumented to speak about them and/or on their behalf. This reality is a result of several intersecting factors.

First, the majority of the 11.3 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. live in just six of the fifty states.¹ The uneven geographic distribution of undocumented immigrants

¹ California, Texas, Florida, New York, New Jersey and Illinois house approximately 60% of undocumented immigrants living in the United States. See Krogstad, Passel, & Cohn, 2015.

combined with the reality that they only comprise a small portion of the U.S. population (around 3.5%) means that undocumented perspectives are not always immediately available in instances where their voices could lend insight. Ximena, who was born in Colombia and arrived in the U.S. at the age of five, suggested during our interview, "It's numbers versus numbers. At the end of the day, the undocumented community is so small, and media can try as hard as possible. I just feel that it's an uphill battle even for media because of the demographics of the United States." But higher concentrations of immigrants in particular locations do not always lead to more media inclusion. Scholars Irene Bloemraad, Els de Grauw, and Rebecca Hamlin (2015) found in an analysis of U.S. and Canadian local newspaper content that the quantity of immigrant populations within a locale was not positively correlated to increased "civic visibility" or mediated coverage of that population, suggesting that quantity of available immigrants cannot fully account for a lack of self-representation.

As Jon, who was born in the Dominican Republic and arrived in the U.S. with his parents when he was six, told me during a recent interview, "The media has such a narrow view on undocumented immigrants because they don't have that much of an opportunity to actually go and talk to them personally." Instead, the media he encounters seems to be "one sided—very rarely I will see someone who is undocumented putting their own two cents in there and I would love to see more of that." Jon thinks a lot of progress could be made if more media gave their audiences an opportunity to "see where these people are coming from instead of hearing it from a second voice." Several other narrators mentioned a similar dissatisfaction with the deficiency of undocumented self-representation in major media outlets. While praising the good work that local immigrant organizations or "community DREAMers" are doing in and around New York, Freddy expressed his frustration that this work is not finding its way into mainstream press. "I don't really see them in media," he explained. "Why has no media interviewed the president of community DREAMers?" Ximena told me with exasperation, "There's no undocumented character at any TV show, ever." Josue believes self-representation could reassure audiences, and wishes that when news media "speak about immigrants coming from a certain place, [that] they show one person [who is undocumented] saying, 'We left because of this. We're not coming here to hurt you guys. We're not coming to steal your jobs.'" When I asked Omrie how media in the U.S. could do a better job portraying undocumented immigrants, he responded eagerly, "They should have all these DREAMers speak! They should have all these DREAMers talking...they should really record that and put that out there. There should be more of that."

Self-representation of undocumented immigrants in mainstream U.S. news or political discourse is also unlikely because almost half of the undocumented adults in the U.S. have not completed high school. While 25 to 30% of 16 to 24-year-olds overall enroll in college, only about ten percent of undocumented immigrants enroll, and are less likely than native-born students to graduate (Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez-Orozco, 2015). Once they graduate, individuals without legal status do not have permanent authorization to work in the U.S., so few go on to pursue careers as journalists or political correspondents or to work in other professions that would encourage increased media representation.

Finally, individuals without legal status may be reticent to be interviewed or identified in media for fear of detention or deportation. As Josue stated simply during our interview, "A lot of us are scared and we don't want to come out." While it is the case that many U.S.-born citizens may experience few mediated or face-to-face encounters with undocumented immigrants because of the aforementioned factors, Josue reveals that even when citizens do interact with undocumented immigrants, they may not be aware of it. As Natalia explained to me, "I wouldn't say I keep it a secret, but it's not something I'm talking [about] very comfortably." In the silence that results from such discomfort, both immigrants and

citizens must often rely on secondhand representation to provide them with the tools needed to understand the contested issue of immigration.

These intertwined barriers to self-representation have resulted in "a significant lack of counter definition to the main frame[s]" used to describe and characterize immigrant life (Horsti, 2003, p. 51). Unless these barriers are overcome, individuals who are not undocumented themselves will continue to retain control of the means of production of immigrant narratives by producing the majority of portrayals of undocumented immigration in mainstream media, and will thus remain central to mythmaking about undocumented immigration. The telling of others' narratives is never a neutral act; as Linda Alcoff (1991) writes, "When one is speaking about others, or simply trying to describe their situation or some aspect of it, one may also be speaking in place of them, that is, speaking *for* them" (p. 9). Speaking about others is always a matter of power.

4. Portrayals of Undocumented Immigrants in U.S. Public Discourse

One cannot speak of U.S. media as a generalized whole; narratives vary by political leaning, medium, and geographic location. For instance, coverage about immigration in U.S. news tends to focus more on illegality the closer the media organization is located to the U.S.-Mexico border (Branton & Dunaway, 2009). While mainstream portrayals of undocumented immigration in the U.S. are not unanimously alarmist and sometimes include neutral or positive portrayals of immigrants (Chavez 2013; Bloemraad, de Graauw, & Hamlin, 2015), analyses dating back to the early 1900s reveal the widespread prevalence of mediated narratives that present immigrants as "indigestible food, conquering hordes, and waste materials" (O'Brien, 2003, p. 33). By speaking for immigrants while simultaneously highlighting their otherness, U.S. discourse paradoxically presents immigrants as both known and strangers—all similar to each other and yet different from "us," wholly familiar and yet fearfully strange.

The subjects of mediated immigration metaphors are rarely human; objects and animals are more common. J. David Cisneros (2008) reports that through the use of "similar techniques as the news media coverage of pollution," news media portrays undocumented immigrants as "stationary pollutants contaminating communities and the environment" (p. 581). Jonathan Xavier Inda (2000) reveals how nativist rhetoric sometimes depicts immigrants metaphorically as parasites drawing nutrients from the host nation. Sheila Steinberg (2004) compared newspapers from the Southwestern U.S. and found widespread evidence of language that attributes non-human qualities to undocumented immigrants. Likewise, Sylvia Mendoza argues, "word choice used by the media to cover immigration issues is already biased and dehumanizing. Words like illegals, terrorism, racist, discrimination, Dreamers and illegal aliens strip away positive emotion and relatability" (p. 12). This is not merely a matter of words. As Jean Kilbourne (Kilbourne & Jhally, 2010) contends, dehumanization through objectification is "almost always the first step towards justifying violence" against a group. Dehumanizing representation may affect both how undocumented immigrants see themselves, and how others interpret the effect of immigration on U.S. economics, politics, and culture.

Kendall King and Gemma Puntì (2012) stress the prominence in immigrant-related discourse of metaphors like disease and infection. Their observations emphasize the necessity of questioning both broad and more nuanced ways of describing immigrants; prejudice and nativism may be implicitly embedded in the rhetorical choices of any piece of media. Faist and Ulbricht (2015) note how journalists often refer to highly skilled migrants with terms like "mobility" and "cosmopolitan," but low-skilled individuals as simply "migrants." These semantic differences function as cues for the audience, indirectly suggesting how one should interpret the subjects in question (Cho, Gil de Zuniga, Shah, &

McLeod, 2006). Media representations contain countless numbers of these cues, which may exist in the words used to describe immigrants, or in production and layout choices such as the story's placement, context, and visual elements.

For instance, J. David Cisneros (2008) analyzed a televised CNN report depicting two Hispanic men scaling a sizable barrier along the U.S./Mexico border under the cover of night. Cisneros explains that, as in many similar representations, in this report, "the camera is positioned on the American side of the border, while immigrants scale or duck fences to sneak toward the viewer" (p. 581). This use of perspective may discourage viewers from considering the points of view of the immigrants and instead encourage alignment with the nation into which the immigrants are arriving.

Just as perspective in this CNN report emphasized a visual relationship between viewer and nation in opposition to the immigrant, media about immigrants may make rhetorical choices that trigger correlations in viewers' minds, so that "subtle changes in the descriptors used to characterize objects...shape a range of social judgments made by the audience" (Cho et al., 2006, p. 138). Such leading language remains difficult to study in many cases because its effects occur implicitly; audience members may pick up on a particular trope pertaining to immigrants in media, incorporate its meaning into their beliefs about immigrants, act according to this gained "knowledge" and yet never explicitly state—or even recognize—what influenced their perceptions.

Although a media producer or director cannot control the interpretation of a representation fully, s/he can attempt to influence "how the minds of recipients are 'managed' by such discourse structures" by using dominant codes with largely naturalized meanings (Thweatt, 2005, p. 26). These codes prove indicative of culturally-bound attitudes toward any given subject because they point to a widely familiar concept in order to achieve coherence with the audience. Stuart Hall describes the effect of such a tactic when he writes that "certain codes may, of course, be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed—the effect of an articulation between sign and referent—but to be 'naturally' given" (Hall, Hobson, Lowe, & Willis, 2003, p. 121). These implicit links between sign and referent are "strengthened each time they are activated in tandem" so that news media—which tend to use recurring language and format in order to reinforce audience perceptions of consistency and professionalism—may create, sustain, and reinforce particular conceptions of immigrants in the minds of their audience members (Cho et al., 2006, p. 138). Although implicit mediated cues and tropes remain difficult to quantitatively measure, their presence in media about undocumented immigrants is ubiquitous.

5. Finding a Part in the Story and Cultivating a Public Voice

Few undocumented immigrants who arrive in the United States as children understand the full implications of their lack of legal status until later in their lives; before they can share their stories with others, they must learn it for themselves. They come, in Gonzales and Chavez's (2012) words, "face-to-face with illegality," sometimes over several years of discovery (p. 262). Recognizing the diverse ways immigrants navigate and negotiate this experience, and the impact of their coinciding encounters with immigrants portrayed in mainstream media, can shed light on the reasons undocumented immigrants may decide to confront the risk of exposure and share their own stories publicly.

Of finding one's way in life, philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) suggests, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" (p. 216). After undocumented youth begin to understand the implications of their undocumented status and familiarize themselves with mainstream

mediated portrayals of immigrants, they come to a crossroads: Will they come to see themselves as part of the story of immigrant activism, or does this story belong to others?

Though secondhand portrayals continue to dominate, three factors in particular have led to more self-representation of undocumented immigrants in media than ever before. First, some of the larger immigrant-rights organizations recognize the power of firsthand portrayals in media and have made it a priority in recent years. The newsrooms and media webpages of organizations such as United We Dream and the New York Immigration Coalition depict both significant production of in-house media content and direct quotation of immigrant activists. Second, digital social media has, to a certain extent, democratized production and made self-representation more possible (Bishop, 2017). Third, former President Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA) has given some individuals temporary protection from deportation and the courage to seek out opportunities to participate in media interviews despite the uncertainty of their futures.

Angy—a blogger, YouTuber, and activist who was born in Colombia in 1990, arrived in the U.S. when she was three, and now has temporary protection through DACA—explained to me, "The media is a tool for us as community organizers. When we're able to be interviewed for the newspaper, or TV, or radio, we're able to message what we want the audience to hear. Working with media has worked for us to be able to outreach [to] people to tell them about different updates or events we're having." Angy's experience demonstrates that, in some cases, immigrants without legal status are able to overcome the obstacles to self-representation in media, and that they retain agency in spite of the obstacles that prevent them from full participation in U.S. civic life. Of course, self-representation in media does not guarantee the delivery of a preferred message to an audience, as other entities choose which immigrants to interview, and which sound bites to use in particular contexts.²

I met David Chung on a hot afternoon at the end of July 2016. David was born in Seoul, South Korea in 1990 and raised by his aunt and uncle—who he assumed were his parents—until his grandmother brought him to the United States at three years old. In Queens, New York, he reunited with his real mother and father, who had migrated to the United States when David was a baby. He learned that he was undocumented in high school, and first remembers seeing some public discussion about undocumented immigration in 2010, when the DREAM Act came close to passing. David began to take notice of television portrayals of undocumented "DREAMer" activists who would often appear in graduation regalia or draped in the American flag as they petitioned for the passing of the act. "I started seeing the cap and gowns...I saw young people holding flags over their shoulders, and I think that's the first image that I had of 'This is what it means to be a DREAMer'—that you have to go to school, that you may even go to the military to get a green card and eventually citizenship," he remembers.

He noticed a clear dichotomy in these portrayals. On one side, he explained, there were college-bound, America-loving immigrants who showed themselves to be "hardworking students—the narrative was they come in[to the United States] through no fault of their own and that they should be provided a pathway to citizenship because they are the good immigrants." On the other, David explained, "There are the laborers that are always portrayed as the bad immigrants, the people that came through the borders...they just came here just so that they could steal the jobs of Americans." It was clear to him that

² In my own project, I have attempted to mitigate this concern by speaking with undocumented activists at each stage of the work, circulating drafts of the writing to the narrators whose experiences I include, and adapting the prose according to these narrators' suggestions and recommendations.

that the promise of the path to citizenship that would be afforded by the proposed DREAM Act was geared exclusively toward the former group.

David told me that at that moment he did not yet "associate" himself with the movement: "I still called myself 'illegal,' I still didn't associate myself with other DREAMers, and when I saw it on TV, I knew it was something that would affect me but I still didn't take the initiative to be like, 'Oh, I should look into what I should be doing to further the cause.'" When the DREAM Act failed to pass in 2010, DACA had not yet been announced, and David was so discouraged he decided to self-deport: "I was like, at least in Korea maybe I'll have an identification number [so] that I'll be part of the society."

After deciding to leave the United States, David joined the MinKwon Center—an Asian American immigrant rights organization in New York City—because, he thought to himself, "If I'm going to go back to Korea I need to know Korean." He knew MinKwon offered social services, including language classes, to the Korean community. In 2012, soon after he joined MinKwon, President Obama announced the DACA program and David learned that the center could help him to apply. The other organizers at MinKwon saw DACA as a clear sign of progress and encouraged David to actively participate in the immigrant rights movement. He recalls, "Where I evolved into the movement building was when DACA happened, when I realized I would be eligible for it...there was this immense guilt that all of these other young people had sacrificed school, had sacrificed work to push for DACA and I had done *nothing* and I'm still going to benefit from it. That's when I was like, 'Let me at least help other people apply.'" He consequently gave up his plans of self-deportation and began advocating for a path to citizenship that would not distinguish deserving immigrants from undeserving, but would instead allow all immigrants an equal opportunity to earn their place as citizens of the United States. Today, David is an activist and community organizer at United We Dream (UWD), the largest immigrant-youth-led activist organization in the U.S.

There is no formula for predicting whether undocumented immigrants will choose to develop and cultivate a public voice in service of immigration reform. David's personal evolution from hiding his status to being eager to tell his story and convincing others to do the same is just one manifestation of the transformation young people undergo after learning that they are undocumented. For David, temporary protection from DACA, a sense of support from a local organization, frustration with dichotomous mediated portrayals of immigrants, and a feeling of guilt about being passive while others worked for his rights provided the necessary conditions for him to make the transition from feeling dissociated from the immigrant rights movement and planning for self-deportation to becoming an outspoken community organizer campaigning for the right to citizenship.

But others in similar situations stay quiet. There are many reasons that immigrants may decide not to share their stories and advocate for reform. Some are fearful of the legal or social implications; others simply do not believe in their ability to affect change. When I asked a young undocumented woman named Kattia, who was born in Peru, if she had ever considered telling her story as a means of activism, she told me frankly, "I think I would like to be involved in it, but it seems like we're just not going to be heard, so it feels like I would not be able to make a difference if I got involved in something like that." Others have little concern about what American audiences think about immigrants and are therefore not compelled to take part in the movement. Adam, who was born in Hungary, told me, "At this point, personally, I don't care what anybody really says about the whole immigration thing. I'm here—what are you going to do?" For every immigrant activist who steps out of the shadows to tell the story of living undocumented in public, there are many more who never do.

Both material and immaterial factors play into the ways prospective storytellers approach MacIntyre's (1984) question—"Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?"—and decide whether to share their stories publicly (p. 216). Among the material factors,

safety of one's family is often of paramount concern. The implications of coming to terms with one's status are not merely personal. Undocumented youth are well aware that their decisions about how to negotiate their status—and whether to tell their stories publicly—could have direct effects on their families, especially those members who also lack legal status. This reality prevents even some impassioned potential activists from having full confidence in their decision to make their status public.

Jin, who was born in South Korea and has temporary protection from deportation through DACA, told me,

Sometimes I'm a little apprehensive about whether I should be saying this stuff because I'm protected legally, but my parents necessarily aren't. There's always an internal conflict that I feel because I have relief from deportation under President Obama's executive order [DACA], but that doesn't extend to my parents, so even though I want to be vocal and I want to talk about and deal with this, it always feels a little scary because I know what the realistic possibilities are. That's something that I always try to find a balance about. My parents, they always encourage me to do what I feel is right, but what I feel is right is sometimes to not say anything because of that fear.

Likewise, Ricardo, who was born in Mexico and arrived in the U.S. when he was fourteen, explained, "I've always been very secure about myself. For me, if it was just me, I wouldn't care about what will happen to me, but it's my family too, so I also have to think about them. For me, that was, I guess, the hardest part to think about if [coming out] was worth it or not, because when I come out of the shadows, they will come out of the shadows as well."

Ultimately, Ricardo did decide to take the risk to "come out of the shadows." He has gone on to gather acclaim as an activist photographer, and was featured in a short film called "Meet the Undocumented Immigrant Who Works in a Trump Hotel" (2015). When some of my colleagues and I hosted an immigration teach-in to support students who were processing the implications of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Ricardo sat facing the audience with representatives from the New York Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs and the State Department, spoke boldly about his own story, and screened his short film for a crowd of around two hundred people.

Ricardo's film has now been viewed more than 400,000 times on YouTube. Though he was initially concerned about how his mother would respond to it, he explained, "when she saw how big it blew up, she just was proud, I think." Ricardo went on, "I think for a while she was also maybe a little bit scared, but she knew that it meant a lot to me... she was just really proud. I think that how proud she was of me, that's overshadowed how scared she might've been maybe." Jin and Ricardo's narratives make clear that concern for family members' opinions and safety may influence the decision about whether to share one's story, but this concern cannot predict whether individuals will choose to become public storytellers. Some young people who have no family in the U.S. still choose to stay quiet, and others whose families discourage activism decide to speak publicly in spite of their warnings.

6. Speaking for Oneself: "Third Space" Narrative Activism

While there is no sure way to predict the conditions that will lead undocumented individuals into activism, there are some noticeable commonalities in the ways the narrators in this project talk about their motivations for cultivating a public voice in order to publicly tell their experiential reclaimant narratives of life without legal status. Specifically, the participants in this project point to an internalization of Americanness and the importance of creating spaces of belonging as a strategy for grappling with a lack of legal citizenship.

Several of the narrators explained to me their desire for U.S. law to align with their own longstanding feelings of Americanness. Piash described emphatically, "We're Americans. I think of myself as an American. [We want] to make sure people realize that we're Americans. We're not just 'illegal immigrants,' we're Americans. You can call us whatever you want, but we feel American." Ximena, whose preferred pronouns are "they" and "them," told me about a feeling of pride that swelled in them during an experience watching fireworks on July 4th with friends on Long Island. The feeling was tainted by the coexisting and pervasive reality of their undocumentedness. "I'm *so* proud to be an American," Ximena told me. "The level of exclusion that July 4th brings to a person who identifies as American but is pursued by the federal government—it's just ridiculous." For these two, feeling American without having the legal status to corroborate it creates a kind of cognitive dissonance. Unable to legally claim a name with which they deeply identify, or to benefit from the rights it would afford, they are left with the burden of negotiating this dissonance themselves. What these narrators describe as lacking is not Americanness in the imagined sense (see Anderson, 1983), but rather an inability to reconcile their external reality with an internalized identity.

Storytelling is one means by which reclaimant narrators may negotiate the kind of dissonance that Piash and Ximena describe. Reclaimant narratives are experiential, partial accounts undocumented immigrants offer as public performances to counter-narrate prevailing discourses by revealing the incompressible nature of their firsthand perspectives. When Katherine remarks at the beginning of this paper that "[t]he thing that nobody can take from us is our story," she points to the reality that reclaimant narratives appear as embodied testimonies of the lived experiences of individuals, rather than broad or generalizable information.

I read the ways undocumented immigrants put their experiences to use in activist storytelling from subjugated positions as a defensive technique. Making a case for one's humanity through experiential storytelling is not required of all persons equally, but especially of those whose rights to personhood are doubted. In her book, *Social Death*, Lisa Marie Cacho (2012) demonstrates how undocumented immigrants have been rendered "*ineligible for personhood...subjected to laws but refused the legal means to contest these laws as well as denied both the political legitimacy and moral credibility necessary to question them*" (p. 6). Read through this lens, the public telling of immigrants' firsthand narratives appears as an attempt to recover the right to personhood in a nation where this right has been compromised. The gathering, recording, and sharing of experiences is a declaration that these experiences matter, that they should be preserved, and that they belong within the canon of United States histories.

Berkeley law professor Kathryn Abrams (2015) asserts that participation in the immigrant rights movement allows immigrants to "enact, in daring and surprising ways, the public belonging to which they aspire," and that "a *feeling* of authorization" may accompany solidaristic actions in the service of reform (p. 2, 13). In other words, immigrants who lack legal citizenship may recover, through the performance of their stories, a kind of cultural citizenship and sense of belonging. Of course, cultural citizenship is outside of legal purview, and therefore is not subject to governmental control and monitoring in the same way as legal citizenship.

In his senior thesis, Daniel, a young undocumented man who was born in the Philippines, writes about finding a space of belonging through sharing experiences with other immigrants in ways that both confirm and complicate the kind of cultural citizenship Abrams describes:

My immigration story is not uncommon, with many of my experiences shared by other undocumented immigrants I have met the last few years.... In the undocumented immigrant

spaces I have visited and been a part of, I see many different people come together, united by the shared experiences of being undocumented in the U.S. and the different institutional barriers they face. These established safe spaces provide a place of comfort and belonging for undocumented immigrants in a nation that has continuously denied them of access to funding for higher education, public assistance, health care, and rights associated with citizenship.

As Daniel makes clear, in addition to the potential of narrative activism to change some future legal reality, there are more immediate communal benefits that follow from sharing reclaimant narratives. In these spaces, immigrants claim the power to speak for themselves, and may experience a sense of belonging even within a nation attempting to expel them.

But Daniel's reflection also raises an indication that by characterizing belonging according to and within the paradigm of citizenship, Abrams' notion of "public belonging" obscures the coalitional agency of activists to manufacture spaces that serve interests outside the unilateral goal of political acceptance and legal rights. Daniel writes about how the sharing of experience results in the creation and maintenance of "established safe spaces" in which immigrants may find comfort and belonging irrespective of the uncertainty of future immigration reform. Women's studies scholar Adela Licona's (2012) notion of "third space" provides a clearer interpretation of the radical possibilities to which Daniel points.

As a starting point, Licona takes Gloria Anzaldúa's poetry about "borderlands," or, spaces around boundaries that constitute belonging and exclusion from which marginalized groups might speak. Licona reveres Anzaldúa's work but admits concern that because "borderlands" connote the existence of a single, linear boundary, the concept obscures everything but the desire to fit neatly on one side or the other. She explores the "unrealized potential" of Anzaldúa's concept by proposing the existence of "third space"—a coalitional site for activism inhabited by individuals "whose geographic location is not the border" but who exist on the sociopolitical fringe even as their lives are firmly situated within the communities that consider them illegitimate outsiders (p. 13). In Daniel's words, such a possibility appears in his description of a "place of comfort and belonging for undocumented immigrants in a nation that has continuously denied them of access to funding for higher education, public assistance, health care, and rights associated with citizenship." Licona suggests that "[i]n third space, borderlands rhetorics and their representational potentials emerge to reclaim and resignify language practices beyond dichotomous borders" (p. 12-13). In other words, reading "borderlands" through "third space" allows a reclamation of language practices that are freed of the inside/outside binary that a border suggests.

Applying Licona's logic to reclaimant narration by reading legal status as a border makes clear how activism may involve creating and maintaining coalitional sites that disrupt simplified dichotomies between il/legal, un/documented, non/citizen bodies and provide speaking spaces for the proclamation of value and selfhood outside these binary titles. It is certainly the case that activist storytelling is designed to advance a goal—typically, a pathway to citizenship. But reclaimant narratives also function as refusals to accept secondhand characterizations quietly and as assertions of a right to personhood irrespective of the nation's laws and policy.

The decision to tell one's story for oneself presents an opportunity to redefine what it means to be an immigrant, or, as undocumented writer Gina Diaz (2015) explains, "to deconstruct the word 'immigrant' and construct its real meaning every time you create a sentence describing yourself." Alcoff (1991) posits, "In speaking for myself, I am also representing myself in a certain way, as occupying a specific subject-position, having certain characteristics and not others, and so on. In speaking for myself, I (momentarily)

create myself—just as much as when I speak for others I create their selves” (p. 10). Alcoff’s view of the self-making potential of first-person narrative is directly applicable to the immigrant rights movement; her assertion highlights the reality that the outcome of reclaimant narratives is not merely public and single-faceted. Instead, the decision to participate in narrative activism produces both an immediate effect and an after-effect. In the immediate, activism allows undocumented individuals to constitute their selves and assert their rights within a constructed “third space” of belonging. This act stands in direct resistance to the reality that undocumented immigrants in the U.S. are frequently spoken *for*—in education, governmental discourse, and news—rather than recognized as having a right to speak. The after-effect involves the publicity of the message as it finds its way into cultural discourse and the influence it has on negotiating activists’ future social and legal positions.

When undocumented young people come to see themselves as part of the story of immigrant activism and begin to share their experiences publicly, stories become a form of capital. David told me, “We might not have a lot of money, we might not have all of these other resources, but we do have people.” The goal in David’s work is to get people from being “wary about sharing” to the point of readiness to speak about what he calls their “story of self.” The decision is a weighty one; when immigrants use their selves—that is, their experiences, emotions, and fears—as the material for story crafting, they put their very lives on the line. This is not a legally protected form of activism—such as the constitutional right of citizens to exercise free speech—but a vulnerable one. The “story of self” requires a kind of baring of one’s person without being assured of any positive outcome.

In this paper, I attempted to reveal the centrality of narrative and storytelling to the sociopolitical status of undocumented immigrants living in the United States. The narrators in this project draw on personal experience to tell partial, performative, oppositional and incompressible reclaimant narratives of life without legal status. Storytelling is self-making. It is a declaration of meaning. It is an act of defiance, bravery and independence—a refusal to be spoken for, a simple yet powerful assertion of humanity. First-person reclaimant narratives told by undocumented immigrants reveal complex accounts of independence and activism—trailblazers pushing headlong into an uncertain future. But they also reveal human beings with fears, dreams, desires, and ambitions, pushing back against the ways that popular and policy discourse objectify immigrants. For at least as long as these immigrants are denied a path to citizenship, competing discourses of undocumented immigration will continue to work for and against those who strive to convince their U.S. audiences that immigrant rights deserve their attention.

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